WASHINGTON POST
23 AUG 1973

Letters to Editor—A Deadly Serious Matter in U.S.S.R.

By Robert G. Kaiser
Washington Post Foreign Service

MOSCOW, Aug. 22 — If a light-sleeping Muscovite loses his temper at a noisy neighbor, he may storm upstairs to complain—or he may write a letter to Pravda, the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party.

The other day, Pravda published a letter from an irate citizen who wanted to know what had happened to the large-size envelopes the newspaper said one year ago would soon be back in supply.

Apparently, after another reader's complaint, Pravda had investigated the large-size envelope problem, and reported that the shortage would soon be cleared up.

"There are still no large envelopes here," Pravda's latest complainant reported from his home in central Russia.

Soviet citizens have a rich, if complicated, relationship with their newspapers. Several million citizens write letters each year, some in response to articles that appeared in the paper, but most of them offering spontaneous praise, damnations or suggestions. Ninety per cent of Pravda's letters fall into the suggestion category.

The Soviet regime takes these letters deadly seriously. At Pravda, and at most newspapers, the letters department is the biggest.

Pravda's has 50 employees, including 26 full time letter readers and eight reporters who develop leads from letters into stories. Izvestia, the government newspaper, has a rule that every letter must be answered within three days.

Izvestia says it receives half a million letters a year from about eight million subscribers. Pravda, with 10 million subscribers, gets at least 30,000 letters a month.

These statistics seem proof enough that Soviet citizens take their newspapers seriously. The statistics are confirmed by visual evidence; people all over the country read the papers.

This point seems worth making. If a publisher in Western Europe or America tried to sell a newspaper on the Soviet model, he would be hooted all the way to bankruptcy court. Imagine the formula: no bad news, almost no crime or sensation, less than 20 per cent of the paper devoted to the previous day's events, heavily and blatantly slanted political news, no news of domestic political debate, no comics, little sports and a huge daily dose of exhortation and propaganda.

But Soviet readers don't devour every morsel. Soviet sociologists have taken readership surveys which show the public is not too enthusiastic about the exhortation and propaganda and prefers human interest stories.

Most of these surveys are regarded as confidential, but an extensive study of Izvestia's readers was published in 1969. Based on 8,000 interviews and 18,000 questionnaires, the survey revealed that propaganda pieces are the least-read in the paper; 18 per cent of the interviewees said they read them systematically.

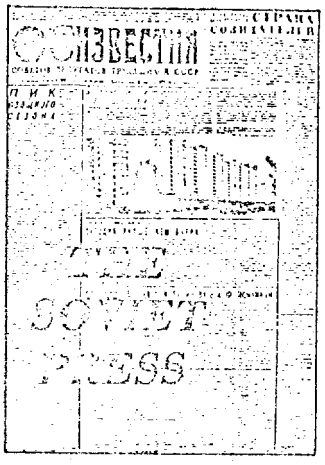
Stories on the work of government agencies also gained an 18 per cent readership; economic articles were read by 23 per cent of the sample; editorials by 30 per cent.

The best read stories concerned human relations ("morals"), satire, family life, exposes of official malfeasance and international news and commentary. All these were read by at least 60 per cent of those polled.

In effect, the stories which occupy the most prominent positions in the paper—the articles that satisfy the Communist idea of what a newspaper should be—were found to be the least read.

The survey also revealed substantial skepticism about what appeared in Izvestia. Of those questioned, more than a third expressed less than full satisfaction with "the completeness and objectivity of the international news."

One reason for readers' skeptical reaction appears to be the overbearing quality of much of the propaganda. The former chief editor of Izvestia, Lev Tokunov, commented on this in an article about the propaganda cam-



paign that led up to the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik revolution in 1967.

"In a number of instances," he wrote, "this work was purposeless, inconsequential, superficial and, finally, simply dull. Page through newspapers and you see a large headline about the [50th Anniversary] jubilee, and under this a hope-filled, ringing subheadline. And under the headlines, gray, incidental items . . ."

Readers inevitably realize that the papers distort some information, which must also contribute to their skepticism.

For example, in all the articles about the first 50 years of Soviet power published in that enormous 1967 propaganda campaign, two names never appeared: Joseph Stalin and Nikita Khrushchev. The men who led the country for 40 of those 50 years were too controversial in 1967 to be mentioned.

One Soviet journalist theorized in an interview that readers would miss certain kinds of propaganda in their papers, even if they don't read it now.

An example, he said, was the harvest stories which fill the papers each August and September. These probably aren't widely read, he said, but if they weren't printed people would wonder if the harvest were going badly.

Another journalist suggested that Soviet citizens react differently to news than people in the West. If Walter Cronkite announced that scientists thought they had found a cure for cancer, this Russian suggested, Americans would react cautiously because they are used to a flood of sensational stories which often turn out to be false.

"But a tiny article in Pravda about a possible cancer cure would cause a sensation here, because papers are read differently," he said. The popular assumption is that if Pravda mentions something in any way, it must be important, according to this journalist.

(The regulations of the government censor specifically prohibit publishing any stories about possible cancer cures without special permission.)

Soviet editors aren't always guided by a concern

continued